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How Can Situational Judgment Tests and Assessment Center Exercises Help Personality Psychology?

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Abstract

Lievens has offered personality psychologists some interesting suggestions for incorporating personnel-selection methods into personality research. These can certainly spawn fruitful new contributions to specific aspects of the field. Ultimately, however, I think the most valuable contribution these methods might make might be to get personality psychologists to realize the limitations of traditional broad trait conceptualizations such as the Big Five.

Acknowledging their debt to personality psychology, Lievens has offered some interesting ideas for bringing into personality psychology methods and ideas personnel-selection psychologists have developed for their purposes. They have found that assessing personality as well as their usual batteries of candidate experience and attainment resumes, reference letters, personal interviews, etc., can enhance their ability to predict effective job performance. Personality psychologists maintain a veritable 'cottage industry' of studies reporting moderate associations between 'Big Five' personality traits and life 'outcomes' from Body Mass Index and leisure-time activities to school grade-point averages and interpersonal relationship quality to life satisfaction and mortality, so mining the idea that what works for effective job performance will work for these other life outcomes too has merit. And Lievens has certainly made some valuable suggestions for doing this.

But, as he also notes, personality psychologists and personnel-selection psychologists have very different core research agendas. Personality psychologists have as their primary goals understanding how our personalities are structured, how those structures emerge and evolve throughout life, and how whatever has emerged at any point is involved in our ongoing pathways. Personnel-selection psychologists have as their primary goal helping people identify, among groups of self-selected candidates about whom only rather cursory and standardized information can

generally be available, which would be best able to fill specific roles as they wish to see them filled. Moreover, before they apply the techniques Lievens discusses, at least some of the evaluators inevitably have sifted through a larger pile of preliminary written candidate information such as resumes, references, and stock application forms to select those on which to invest further evaluation, in the process likely forming sometimes-biased judgements that can affect appraisal of the subsequent evaluations (not to mention possibly eliminating excellent candidates). Personality psychologists face this potentially limiting step too, but only indirectly.

I think this gulf between primary goals can tell both fields something important. Lievens' integration suggestions have focused on the aspects of personality psychology that involve situations most similar to the very constrained circumstances of personnel selection, and these are certainly important. But they also are rather 'fringe', special-interest questions in personality psychology. Attempts to integrate personnel-selection methods into the core areas of personality psychology immediately bring the fraught questions of personality-situation transactions to the fore. The roles of the situation in personality and personnel-selection psychology differ at least as fundamentally as do their overall research goals.

The selection setting is highly constrained at at least three levels. Each level is seen only rarely in real life, and the combination almost never. One level is the activity script – what activities will be conducted, under what circumstances, when. Another is evaluation of situation participants' specific behaviors within those activities. At neither level do the assessed participants have input, though they usually would. The third is more complex: participants' 'skin in the 'game' is huge, but it's skin in the overall assessment process – whether they'll be hired, which will be decided yea or nay on this basis alone, and soon – and *not* in any particulars of the staged situations. That is, they have no ego investment, no reasons for any political or purely selfish motivations, backlogs of gratitude, resentment, or conditioned responses based on prior experiences in their specific assigned roles, nor need to live with the consequences of any staged situation itself: none of the 'baggage' that so often affects behaviour in day-to-day life. But they *are* highly motivated to display behaviors they *think* the prospective employer would want to see. The fact that personnel selectors know they need to worry about 'faking good' in their assessments indicates that often what contributes most to behavioral display is not 'level' of personality 'trait' as defined in models such as the Big Five, but the

circumstances and choices that brought the person to the displaying situation and the person's interpretations of and goals within it.

This in turn suggests that personality traits as we define them are not latent biological 'forces', functions, or processes of some kind, 'caused' by particular combinations of genetic and environmental transactions that in turn 'cause' life outcomes the way rain causes grass to be wet or viruses cause fevers. Rather, they are behavioral patterns personality psychologists happen to have found very generally and arbitrarily useful to gather together to describe present population structure but little beyond this. These 'trait' collections each evolve idiosyncratically in each of us, directly in tandem with so-called 'life outcomes', in co-emergent rather than causal association. We don't exercise and keep our clothes neatly folded 'because' we are conscientious; rather we earn the label 'conscientious' when we accumulate lots of orderly habits. Many of us exercise regularly but toss our clothes literally everywhere, while others are couch-potatoes with very neat dressers and closets. And lifetime-regular exercise probably has a lot more to do with longevity than neat dressers and closets.

For personality psychologists, this means that efforts to improve 'life outcomes' by changing so-called personality 'traits' are unlikely to be fruitful. This also helps to explain the never-better-than-barely moderate correlations between those traits and job performance and other outcomes in both personality and personnel-selection research. For personnel-selection psychologists, this means they seek not people scoring highly on 'measures of extraversion or conscientiousness', but people who have the skills, motivations, and judgement to display appropriate behaviors falling under these banners in appropriate ways at appropriate times. And it limits the ability of personality-selection assessment exercises to help personality psychologists address their fundamental questions of how we come to be who we are at any point and where that leads us, and to understand how situations are involved in this. Sure, use them where they can help us around the 'edges' of those questions, but if what we call personality 'traits' really do evolve as I suggest, what these exercises might accomplish most effectively is helping us see that the 'personality trait' emperor that has ruled the field for so long is wearing no clothes.